

Nation's Top Education Leader Addresses National FFA Convention

LOUISVILLE, Ky. – With the National FFA Convention held last fall, came the thousands of members, their advisers and families along with a host of guest speakers that ranged from the University of Louisville's famous basketball coach to a top government education leader all there to congratulate and inspire the members and their guests.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan addressed the fourth general session of the convention. He told members by being there and seeing them, he felt so hopeful for the nation's future.

"In this crowd are the future leaders of America. I see future farmers and ranchers and so much more. We have future doctors and professors here," he said. "We have biologists and bio-chemists, lawmakers and lawyers. We have technology experts and teachers, artists and athletes."

Duncan also spoke of the power of education in what he referred to as a simple message to the convention.

"Our nation needs your skills, your passion, your compassion and your talents to compete and prosper in a knowledge-based, globally competitive economy," he said. "In order to thrive, our communities need your leadership and commitment to civic engagement."

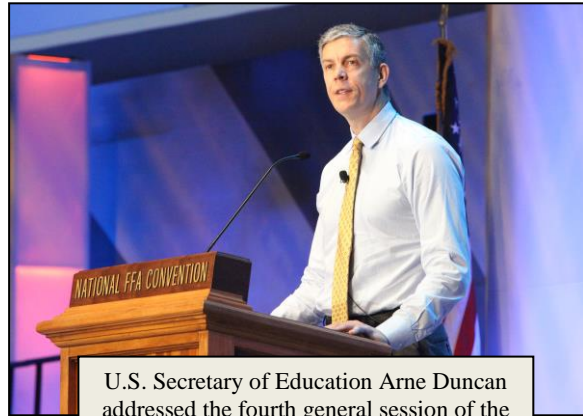
Before Duncan took the stage he answered questions during an impromptu press conference. He told reporters these are tough economic times and many programs in education had been cut, not just agriculture education.

"I think as a nation, we are at a crossroads and we have to decide is education an investment or is it an expense," he said. "I think education is the best investment we can make. I think all of our children deserve a well- round, world-class education and when we cut education, we cut off our nose to spite our face."

When asked why the nation continues to see cuts in education in light of the fact, U.S. tests scores keep falling behind those in other countries, Duncan said as a nation, we are just far too short-sighted and complacent.

"I feel this huge sense of urgency. We have to get better faster but far too many people think that somehow these things are extra-curricula," he said. "I don't think music is extra; I don't think debate is extra; I don't think FFA is extra. I think these are the kinds of things that every child needs to have a well-rounded, world-class education."

As far as his message to the FFA members, Duncan said they were an extraordinary group of young people and he wanted to do everything he could to inspire them and keep them on the path educationally to help lead the country where it needs to go.



U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan addressed the fourth general session of the National FFA Convention.

“The culture that FFA helps to build of service, of leadership, of commitment, I think is simply remarkable,” he said. Duncan added that education is like a tree that bears fruit.

“It is not planted so that it can just grow, be harvested and then left to wither,” he said. “With hard work, education takes roots. It replenishes, it nurtures a lifelong love of learning and it transforms the opportunities that a family has, literally for generations to come.”

He pointed out he had learned a lot about agriculture education in that ag-ed is vital to the future of America’s prosperity and that agriculture educators face unique challenges but they can also tap into unique strengths within their strong tight-knit communities.

“I’ve learned that agriculture education is very much about the jobs of the future and not backwards-looking curricula to try and preserve the past,” he said.

During his speech, Duncan mentioned the FFA chapter in Spencer County, Kentucky and how it became the first chapter to be awarded the FFA’s Model of Excellence Award a year ago.

“Spencer (County) High has kept ag-ed at its core by moving beyond the simple study of traditional crops in the region like tobacco. Instead FFA members take classes in aquaculture. They study greenhouse technology including greenhouse structures and environmental regulations of greenhouses. FFA leaders at that chapter find ways to make agriculture education fun and relevant and engaging,” he said.

Duncan also mentioned Kentucky’s Central Hardin High School FFA chapter. He said the members there are performing service learning and spreading awareness about hunger.

“They educate Kentucky National Guardsmen about gardening so those guardsmen can take that knowledge they learned with them to Afghanistan where they are doing agriculture development work,” he said.

By the end of the convention, the FFA organization had set a record for attendance at the national convention with nearly 63,000 coming to Louisville for the event.



Secretary Duncan met with reporters before addressing the National FFA Convention.